

MY LIFE IN THE WAVES

by

Kit Firth Cress

In June of 1941 I had graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a B.S. degree in Education. I was to be a teacher, one of the few professions open to women at that time. But to teach in the Pittsburgh school system, I had to teach for two years in an outlying district which did not appeal. Instead, I took a job with the Bell Telephone Company as a service representative in the business office. Here we took care of customer needs, wants, bills, and complaints. These, of course, were the days when customers were important, and we were trained to be polite and helpful. Ah, nostalgia! Also in this job I was paid \$18.75 a week -- even with a degree! More nostalgia!

This was my milieu when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941. I remember very well. I had washed my hair (which was long!) and was towel-drying it in front of the gas stove -- no hair dryers or open fireplaces, either -- when the announcer interrupted the music on my radio to stutter and babble that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor on Sunday morning. That was all we were told at the time, but the result was national rage. Everyone wanted to be involved, and we all searched desperately for some way to help our country and avenge the insult.

There was really nothing for women at the time: plane spotters, Red Cross, a few volunteer groups doing odds and ends, but nothing important. The factories were not geared up to top production yet; and, in Pittsburgh, women in the steel mills were unthought of.

It took the government several months to get Women's Services organized; but, in June of 1942, I went to Philadelphia to take the exam for a commission as an officer in the Naval Reserve. Alas for my high hopes! I passed the English part of the exam but failed the math section (and I still can't do math -- even fractions).

I went back to my job but decided to enlist anyhow as a seaman (private); and, in December of 1942, I left for Cedar Falls, Iowa, with the first class of enlisted WAVES. This was boot camp where we all had to learn how to be sailors. The midwest seemed an unlikely spot for such Navy training, but nothing about my training was ever normal. It never is, I discovered, especially when you are the first.

I find it rather strange and also interesting that nowadays the first question people ask me when I say I was in the service during World War II is why did I join? I realize that no one who was not alive then and old enough to understand could ever feel the pulse of the country. With very few exceptions, the whole nation literally rose up in arms. We had been insulted, lied to, and betrayed; and we wanted revenge. It was a universal feeling called patriotism, and I'm not sure it exists now in the same innocent, naive sense that it did in 1941. Don't forget we were still an unsophisticated, agrarian society at the time -- not well travelled and very insular -- and we responded to the outrage at Pearl Harbor with an immediacy that I think should have worried the Japanese.

Of course, the other reason was that I was young (twenty-one) and smart enough to know that all the single young men would be gone so it might be wise to go where the boys were!

The school at Cedar Falls had been turned over completely to the Navy, so we slept in the students' dormitories, four to a room; used the classrooms for our indoctrination sessions; and learned to march in the gym. We were drilled by retired Navy chiefs, one of whom will live in my memory forever. He was the one who kept telling us to "pick up our dress" -- and one day, we all did! With skirts held high, we marched down the floor without a peep. I don't believe he

ever returned, although we all wore slips in those days so it was extremely respectable but also extremely funny.

We marched down the corridors of the school to classes and meals. During the time when we got our shots, we carefully stepped over the bodies in our path of those who had fainted from the effects.

We were still in civilian clothes since our uniforms had not arrived yet. The uniforms were designed by Mainbocher, I believe, and were great compared to the WAC uniforms. In the Navy, officers and enlisted personnel wore the same uniform; only the rank stripes on the sleeves designated officers.

I enjoyed Cedar Falls: it was Christmastime, it snowed every day; the snow was clean, and it sparkled. This was something I had never seen back in Pittsburgh -- clean snow!

I shared my room with three other women, and I can't remember any of their names now. But I do remember one woman who did not pass the physical we were given during boot camp. She had to wait for her discharge papers while we went on with our training. She had given up her job, had been sent off with much fanfare from her small town, and now was going back home as what was, in effect, a failure. Another roommate had joined the WAVES because her husband had been drafted. The irony was that he was rejected, but she had no grounds for an honorable discharge so she had to stay in the service!

At the end of boot camp I was given leave and went back home -- by train, of course, as there were no commercial airplanes then. The trains were jammed with service personnel and their dependents; there were no seats in the coaches, so several of us spent the night in the baggage car, sleeping on the mail bags. It was fun since there were males as well as mail, and I met a handsome Naval cadet who also had orders to Norman, Oklahoma, where I was to be stationed.

NAS (Naval Air Station), Norman, Oklahoma, was another first. As we were the first enlisted WAVES, there were no WAVES barracks ready. We, therefore, were put into an empty men's barracks and discovered that the urinals made a great place to hang our stockings, panties, and bras to dry after washing them

in the sinks. The johns had no doors, so the last john in the line was reserved for those who needed a bit of privacy. And the shower was a riot -- a communal room large enough for twenty women since it had twenty showerheads. Talk about culture shock for me, an only child who never had had to share anything! The bunks were double, top and bottom, and each enclave had two sets with four upright lockers between for uniforms, underwear, and makeup. The beds each had one blanket -- all the windows were open at night, the wind literally roared through the building, and we all froze. Oklahoma is cold in the winter, and we all had what the Navy called "Cat Fever". I'm not sure why, but going to sick bay did no good; all you got was a pill, no matter what was wrong with you. I badly sprained my big toe playing soccer (I kicked a bunkmate's leg instead of the ball!), and I still got a pill.

We went to class to learn how to be Aviation Machinist Mates. I can't remember anything I learned except the old Navy adage: "Get a bigger hammer". We marched to classes and to the mess hall accompanied by cheers and jeers from the sailors and marines who also were aboard the station for training. The rivalry between the two branches was interesting, and we all learned the doggerel:

Ten thousand gobs laid down their swabs
To fight one sick Marine
Ten thousand more stood by and swore
A bloodier fight they'd never seen.

Of course, we all knew the words to "Bell Bottom Trousers" and "Into the Wild Blue Yonder" as well as other songs, tame nowadays but very naughty then.

We were a mixed group of women from every income and educational level, but we melded very well. We felt we were all in this together and had no time to worry about niceties. We borrowed everything from each other: money, clothes, makeup, food, whatever. We looked out for each other, helped each other get ready for inspection, and all got Mary home from Ships Service when she had had too much 3.2 beer to drink. We all loved her -- she was such an amiable drunk! -- and we didn't want her to get in trouble. We also banded together to strip and shove into the shower the smelly woman who wouldn't keep herself clean.

We had our rough times, too. We had a health lecture during which one of the women asked about Tampax. The doctor who was lecturing answered her question as though she wanted to use the tampon as a birth control contrivance. It was symptomatic of our repression that not one of us stood up and blasted him out of the hall. There was only a small rebellious murmur from the whole group while one of the other doctors stood up and offered us a half-assed apology.

We finally moved into the WAVES barracks, and it was heaven. The johns had doors, the showers were individual stalls, and there were six laundry tubs in the rear plus irons and ironing boards. Of course, the laundry tubs immediately were claimed as bathtubs by the shower haters, but there always was time in between to wash your clothes.

One experience at Norman I will never forget. I witnessed a twister, and it was awesome. We WAVES were all on the flight line that day working on planes when the word came to secure the base. We were to go into the hanger where we were supposed to lie down against the most protected wall, but none of us did. Instead we stood gaping as the funnel cloud passed a few hundred feet away. It picked up tied-down airplanes as though they were toys and flung parts all over the landscape. We didn't realize how lucky we were that we were not in the direct path of the storm so, of course, none of us was frightened. We just enjoyed the show.

Now that we all were becoming old salts, we learned how to get to Oklahoma City for liberty. We rode the electric trolley from Norman to Oklahoma City, an hour's trip, and heaven help you if you drank too much beer in Norman before you left -- there were no facilities on the trolley, and the restroom at the end of the line had to be seen to be believed. It was in Oklahoma City that I renewed my acquaintance with my handsome Naval cadet. He was training to be a pilot. He was too good-looking for his own good, he was a charmer, and we had some great dates; but it all ended when I got the measles. It raced through the barracks; and, when I recovered, I found that I had shared the plague with poor Doug. He was now quarantined, and I shipped out before he recovered. I bet I never would

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have seen him again anyhow! The measles epidemic taught me another lesson about the Navy, though. We WAVES were all in sick bay together; and we learned that, if you were too sick to stand beside your bed at attention during Captain's inspection, you had to lie at attention in your bed.

Training finally ended, and we graduated in spite of doing sentry duty for four hours a night once a week. "I will walk my post in a military manner" and then fall asleep in class during the day. We earned our rate as Aviation Machinist Mate 3/C and got our orders.

I was sent to Corpus Christi, Texas, a permanent NAS where pilots were being trained as night fighters. What a deal -- we worked all day on the flight line and then couldn't sleep at night because the planes took off directly over our barracks. Just as they passed over the barracks, the pilots changed prop pitch, producing a whining roar that brought me right up out of my bunk to escape the crash.

The barracks at Corpus were special because it was a permanent station. There were swimming pools at the end of every street, and in the heat you needed them. Air conditioning didn't exist. However, nothing could compensate for the palmetto bugs (roaches to northerners) that greeted you in the head every morning when you brushed your teeth. They waved at you as you put on your makeup, and then they ate everything in your locker -- food, hose, skirts -- they were insatiable.

I was sent to Kingsville, Texas, a small satellite field outside Corpus where I got to see the fabulous King ranch from the air. We AMMs got flight time pay if we could find a pilot willing to take us up, so we worked at it. The ranch was something else: a mansion, swimming pool, polo field, stables, race track, and dog kennels -- a real treat to see for the unwealthy.

I didn't stay long at Kingsville, though, because I again had been investigating Officers' Training; this time I made it -- I got my orders to report to OCS at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Before I left NAS Norman, Oklahoma, I had applied for Officers' Training

again. This entailed an interview with several very senior Naval officers, both men and women, who scared me witless. They kept asking me questions about why I joined the Navy and what my goals were. I don't believe it ever occurred to these personages that most of us were in the service because that's where the action was. At twenty and twenty-one, which most of us were, it was an exciting adventure -- and we didn't want to miss it!

Nevil Shute, who wrote novels about wartime Great Britain, explained the situation very clearly in his book about the RAF titled *Pastoral*. The commander of the RAF station, an older officer, complained bitterly: "the great adventure on this station isn't bombing Germany. They don't think anything of that. Falling in love is the big business here."

Beyond that, of course, was the deeply buried, unspoken acknowledged thought that we had better put in our two cents' worth if we wanted our country to survive.

I arrived at Smith College for Cadet training and immediately became the envy of Capen House where I was billeted. I already was in uniform, while the rest of the candidates were still in civilian clothes. It speaks well of the Navy system that I did not have to get another uniform. The only change was the blue braid at the wrist on my sleeve indicating officer status, while at the same time my AMM 3/C rate came off my upper arm sleeve.

I did have one happy event during my time at Smith. I had long hair which I wore in a roll around my head. The officer who advised cadets individually informed me that I would have to cut my hair. I asked her why since I had been wearing it this way for the last year. I thought she knew I was a mustang -- the Navy term for an officer who came from the ranks. Her answer was that I hadn't been in the Navy for the past year. Without stopping to think, I replied, "Oh, yes, I have." She was so taken aback by the whole idea that I never heard any more about a haircut. Coming from active service as I had, I brought several new ideas to the officers in charge of the cadets at Smith. When spoken to, I would reply, "Yes, sir", which they couldn't believe at first. I explained that our

officers at both my former duty stations had asked us to call them "sir", and we were happy to do so because none of us liked "ma'am".

The training was not difficult since much of what we were learned I already had in one form or another. My roommates -- there were four of us to a room -- were great. They were all older than I and put up with my complaints until they had enough. Then they told me very plainly to grow up. They were good for me, and I always have been sorry that I didn't keep in touch. That is one of the problems with being a loner. I enjoy people very much when I am with them. However, once the friends move on, I am ready for the next group of new faces and new adventures. Then, too, when the war ended, we all had to start again. There had been five years more or less missing from our lives.

To continue ... Smith College had its pluses. First of all was Miss Deborah Very, the officer in charge of Capen House. She was a terrific personality who knew exactly how to handle us. I never had had a so-called "crush" on any older woman as so many of my friends had in our era. And may I say here that these "crushes" had no sexual overtones. That type of thing never entered our naive little minds. I did admire Miss Very tremendously. I discovered later that many of the other cadets felt the same attraction. When tennis star Alice Marble wrote her thinly disguised fictional account of her experiences at Smith College OCS, Miss Very was included -- the description of her was perfect.

Another plus was our meals at the Northampton Inn. I never have had such good food since. Of course, we were working hard and marching everywhere and always starving. Fifty years later the memory of those blueberry muffins "dance like sugarplums".

The Smith girls who were enrolled at Smith and going to classes at the same time we were looked upon us as slightly demented. I mean, why would any sensible woman subject herself to Navy discipline? In the meantime, very smug in our very smart uniforms, we looked at them with pity and compassion as they dressed in sloppy skirts, their boyfriends' long-sleeved Oxford-cloth shirts, anklets, and

saddle shoes. We thought they were messy!

Another plus -- we got weekend passes, so I went to New York City to meet the current boyfriend who was in the Army OCS school. Even though I was wearing midshipman's insignia on my cap and sleeve (the fouled anchor), I got my first salute. I was so thrilled that I forgot to return it. The saluting business was fun and, for women who rarely got such recognition then, a real plus. I went back to my university during one leave. The University of Pittsburgh had a V-12 program at that time; and, as I walked across the quad, a whole yard full of male cadets in Naval uniform rose to their feet and saluted me. It was as near as I'll ever come to my fifteen minutes of fame. It was impressive to say the least, but this time I did the proper thing: I returned the salute and yelled, "As you were"!

Training did finally end, and I got my commission. The night before the ceremony, however, Lieutenant Very found me in the head, sewing my officer's badge on my hat. We had been wearing the cadet insignia of the fouled anchor, but now we were entitled to wear the shield and eagle. The day had been so busy that I had had no time to sew the darn thing on, so here I was at midnight sewing (something I've never been able to do!) and crying because I was so tired plus hating to sew. Lieutenant Very sent me to bed, and I suspect I was the only officer commissioned the next day whose hat insignia was only partly attached and slightly awry. Incidentally, I, Mary Jane Firth, very obviously a female, was commissioned as an officer and a gentleman. God Bless our Navy.

A new adventure started then. I had some leave and then went on to my new base, Naval Air Station Ottumwa, Iowa. When I first looked at my orders, I thought it said Ottawa, and I couldn't imagine why I was going to help Canada win the war. I soon learned, however, that Ottumwa was right in the midst of the tall corn and watermelons, eighty miles from Des Moines. This was a station where cadets were being taught to fly, and the fact that the weather was too bad half the year to put a plane in the air didn't bother those in power in Washington who authorized the station. Talk about pork barrel!

There were six or eight WAVE officers aboard the station at this time, and our commanding officer was a dear. We shared space at BOQ with the male officers so that, on our corridor, both men and women had rooms. The only concession to our womanhood as it were was the head. We did not have to share that. However, we learned much later that, since we kept the windows down a few inches from the top to clear the steam, the men used binoculars to spy on the showers. The BOQ had two opposing wings; our head was in one, and the men's quarters were in the facing wing. Our only consolation was that they really couldn't see anything; it was just typical male bull!

I worked in the squadron office, and I can't remember now what my job was since I was waiting for the man whose place I took to be shipped out. My job then was Materiel Officer for the squadron. In other words, I was responsible for all the Steermen, SNJs, and any other aircraft on the station. The Steerman, nicknamed the Yellow Peril because of its bright orange-yellow color, was a two-seater, double-wing, open-cockpit plane. The cadet sat in front while the instructor occupied the rear seat. The plane was equipped with dual controls so the instructor could save the cadet determined to kill them both. As for communication, the plane was equipped with a gadget called a Gosport. This was a primitive instrument consisting of a mouthpiece for the instructor connected to the ear of the cadet's helmet by a piece of rubber tubing. This was how the instructor instructed, and there was no backtalk! The above is a true statement. In view of our communications network today, I want my readers to know I am not lying.

Eventually I had my own office in the administration building and a yeoman as a secretary. She was a bit short in the brains department and was a constant embarrassment. On inspection day she hid her cup of coffee in the top drawer of the desk. Of course that was the drawer the Captain pulled open, and coffee went everywhere -- but luckily not on the Captain. I didn't keep her long, thank heaven. She wanted a change of duty and was sent to the flight line to drive the emergency vehicle. There she was discovered to be entertaining sailors in the

back of the van and so earned herself a dishonorable discharge.

The days were busy and interesting except for the days when we lost a pilot or a cadet, and it did happen. BOQ was silent on those evenings, and everyone disappeared into their own quarters.

Aside from that there were dances and parties, and the bar was always busy. The best Scotch was twenty cents a shot, and the rest of the liquor a little cheaper.

We kept getting more and more WAVES aboard so we finally got the whole wing just for us. The Navy took two rooms on each side at the head of the corridor and made a sitting room for us with an exit to the outside. It was down these six or eight steps that I fell spectacularly one day after lunch. I was very fortunate that I was not hurt, but all I worried about was my skirt and slip being up around my waist, exposing areas usually not on view. The screened porch was across from our steps, and there were several gentlemen sitting there when I fell. However, my fall was so dramatic that they all were convinced I was dead, so I guess I lucked out.

There were now fifteen or twenty of us in the wing so we had to double up and share the space with a roommate. This was not really any problem since we were in the rooms only to sleep. One of the privileges of being an officer in the Navy was having beds made and the rooms cleaned by the stewards. We all kept our private stock of liquor in our rooms, and we drew a pencil line to show the amount still in the bottle. However, the stewards were smarter than we were and just refilled the bottle up to the line with water when they drank the liquor. We WAVES learned quickly, though, and we now all drank at the bar.

Once again I became a very popular WAVE because I had acquired a car. A splendid young man nicknamed "Dumbo" crossed my path somewhere during my adventures; and, when he got orders overseas, he came to say goodbye and to give me his car. He was an Army pilot who was later posted in what was then the Indo-China theatre where he was killed. Eventually I sold the car and sent the money to his mother who had joined the WACS. It was an era of "time out of joint".

The Navy Chiefs who really ran the Navy kept my car filled with high-octane airplane gas which made it run beautifully, but I was always afraid it would take off and soar over BOQ and the hangers like Fred MacMurray's Volkswagen. With the car I was able to tour around the countryside, go to Des Moines, and -- even better -- leave the car at the train station so it was available when we came back from leave in Chicago. Only once was there a problem with the car. We came back very late one night and found the car parked in the station, but the keys were locked inside (I had only one set, and everyone used the car). It was no time to waver; I removed my shoe, broke the window on the driver's side with the heel, and opened the door. We were then free to drive on to BOQ, but it was winter, icy cold, and, since cars had no heaters in those days, we arrived at our destination with frozen assets.

Those leaves in Chicago were much fun since we rarely had to spend money. There always were guilt-ridden or patriotic citizens who bought us drinks or dinners and even lent us their cars. Of course, Chicago also was the place where I was put on report for not saluting an officer. Chicago was stuffed with officers, all of higher rank than mine, so, after saluting for ten minutes straight, I just gave up. Naturally, the next officer we saw was bait, and the Shore Patrol immediately put my male escort on report. They were making believe I wasn't there, but that annoyed me so I insisted I be put on report also. The S.P. and their officer thought I was foolish; but, being male, they did not see the snub. When we returned to the base I was called to the Captain's office for a Captain's Mast (Navy for being chewed out). He was kind enough not to say that he thought the whole affair was absolutely unimportant and advised me to salute officers of higher rank from then on. I smiled and nodded and said, "Aye, aye, sir!"

The planes were busy morning and afternoon, plus there was night flying as well. There were Happy Double Recall days when nothing went up because of weather. We amused ourselves on those days with games of chance and some judicious drinking. There also were RON-W messages back to the base from pilots

who had flown out for a day's exercise but who had to Remain Over Night for Weather. We who stayed at home knew this really was Remain Over Night for Women. The favorite spot to RON-W was Springfield, Missouri, where there existed an all-girls school.

We had several so-called Japanese aces who turned their airplanes upside down or over or one wing up and the other down. One farm child addressed the pilot of one of these mishaps with the remark, "Mister, you are a darn poor driver." However, some good came of the accidents. It was almost impossible in Iowa to land anywhere except in a cornfield or a watermelon patch. As the government paid the farmers for the damage, BOQ always had a corn or watermelon feast that night.

We did have several characters aboard the station among the pilots. One, a short man, went out to his Steerman one morning with his parachute slapping against his fanny. These 'chutes were heavy, and he was suffering from a slight hangover. He climbed up the side of the plane, slipped head first into the cockpit, and could not get out. So there he was, legs waving wildly in the air while his friends -- too helpless with laughter to get him out -- let him stew and swear. Everyone's vocabulary was enhanced.

The war was progressing, we were slowly making headway, but I wasn't really interested in "bombing Germany". It was more fun to fall in love, which I did, and I married my pilot at the Officers' Club in our Navy whites attended by my roommate as maid of honor and his roommate as best man. The stars must have been in the right alignment that day because we are still married -- fifty years later!

Some of the questions I am asked now are fascinating in their context. No matter how much I try to explain that World War II was a war of total involvement for the entire country and that patriotism ran high, the youth of today do not understand. I don't think they ever will because the situation that existed then never can happen again. All of the weapons we used then are totally obsolete now. The other fascinating question concerns our treatment as women in the

service. And here I must emphasize that I for one never had any problems. A few minor ones occurred such as the Admiral at one base who never returned WAVE salutes. He was regular Navy and hated the idea of women in the Navy, so he must have decided that, if he ignored us, we would go away. Silly man! But that was a universal slight -- not one just for me. The sailors and Marines we worked with as enlisted personnel seemed rather to admire us and gave us their support. I think it was partly due to the old-fashioned idea of respect for women which still existed back then and partly due to the individual WAVE's own conduct. It was a matter of your own Beau Ideal. The only really nasty remark I ever was aware of was the probably apocryphal story about the WAVE in uniform who got on the elevator with two male Navy officers. They sneered and asked, "Well, what are you supposed to represent, young lady?" She snapped back at them, "Patriotism!" I wish I'd said that!

It was a good experience for me. Now, as I look back on it, I realize that I was proud of myself ... proud that I had the courage, for I wasn't a brave person, to defy my parents who didn't want me to join the Navy; proud to defy the gossip of the time which inferred that a woman who enlisted in the services was little better than a whore; and, most of all, proud that I could serve my country, although I'm sure I never thought of that at the time. I also grew up! I learned to be responsible for travelling arrangements, for being aboard the station at the time my orders said, for handling my money, and for my own behavior. I also learned to take orders, the hardest lesson of all to learn.

The other rather interesting result of my Navy career is the fact that, even after fifty years, I cannot tolerate the Japanese. We WAVES were thoroughly indoctrinated, and I cannot forgive them nor will I ever trust them. It makes me furious when I see programs on television that infer that the United States was responsible for the war and that the use of the atom bomb was inexcusable. My idea is that, if you start an action, you accept the reaction. Did you know that World War II is not even mentioned in Japanese history books or taught in the schools? Also, most Japanese refuse to accept as true the atrocities they

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inflicted on both military personnel and civilians. The underlying conviction seems to be that it wasn't their fault and they didn't do it. Bah!

Authority for Quote on Page 7, Lines 9-11:

Pastoral, Nevil Shute (Pub: Wm Morris & Co, NY, 1944)